

PRECISION ENGAGEMENT

by Staff Sgt. Jeremy Larlee • photos by Master Sgt. Jack Braden

Sweat streams down the sharpshooters' foreheads as they stare down the target through their range finder lenses. The Airmen scan the surrounding area, looking for anything to stay hidden. Checking the surrounding foliage, they decide what to add to their Ghillie suits to better blend in. In this profession, the devil is indeed in the details.

Sharpshooters have no choice but to be sticklers, lest they forget the instruction taught at the Close Precision Engagement Course at Camp Robinson, Ark. The 19-day course has a graduation rate of 70 percent for a reason – it's tough. Since its inception in 2001, the school has graduated 324 students, and it's the only military school of this type to allow female students.

It pushes students to the limit both physically and mentally. Runs in the morning, countless pushups and sit-ups, and marches with 50-pound packs are part of the drill.

"Students must be fit when they get here," said Tech. Sgt. Sean Wallace, the Noncommissioned Officer in Charge of the course. "The students go through several different types of qualifications; of those, three of them are an automatic drop from the course if failed."

Part of the qualification, and vital to being a sharpshooter, is attention to detail.

A single thread of clothing or piece of brass left behind would alert the instructors of the students' presence. One missed detail, no matter how minute, would lead to additional physical exercises.

The intense training is not without reason. Sharpshooters have to be extremely diligent in keeping hidden. The sun sparkling off the edge of a barrel or a bad choice of a hiding place can result in a mission failure. If that isn't difficult enough, the Airmen will most likely only have one chance to hit their target. The standard issue M-24 sniper weapon system is not silenced, and the booming thunder of a shot could send the target into flee mode.

The odds are not all against each sharpshooter though; there is a teammate for every mission. One team member is the shooter and the other acts as the spotter.

"The spotter actually has the most difficult job, because they have to factor in wind and dozens of other factors, while the shooter just has to pull the trigger," said Master Sgt. Greg Palmer of the Air National Guard's 188th Security Forces Squadron.

The team discusses how to get in position to take their shot, and they agree on a position 400 meters away. The journey to that position will be a long

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one, and may take up to five hours. It's a journey made in inches, not feet. And sharpshooters must face the ground so they cannot be spotted, and their ankles and wrists do most of the moving.

"It's a tremendous strain. You are using certain muscles you are not used to using," Sergeant Wallace said. "When you're done, you feel like you just ran a marathon."

When the team finally reaches its position and prepares for the shot, Sergeant Wallace knows what is rushing through the shooter's head.

"If you miss this, you'll have a mover – so let's do it right the first time." 🦅



Blending into the countryside — that's what sharpshooters do when they don their camouflaged Ghillie suits and track targets.

Outside of training, even the barrel of the M-24 sniper rifle would be camouflaged, making the sharpshooter a stealthy, precision engagement force.